

Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

8 January 1985

China: Deng Pressures the Army Old Guard

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Summary

Deng Xiaoping is stepping up the pressure on the People's Liberation Army to support more fully his economic and political reforms. Beijing is now demanding that the armed forces provide extensive material support to China's economic reforms, renewing pressures on veterans to retire, and proposing an extensive Army reorganization in 1985 in addition to carrying on its campaign to reform the party within the military. We are seeing indications that these efforts, along with reports that Hu Yaobang will replace Deng as party Military Commission Chairman, have troubled some senior military personnel.

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Deng's main effort already has begun to pay off: the aged officers are gradually stepping aside. In our view, however, Deng, who is driven by the mounting need to secure the political succession and maintain reform momentum, has pushed for more than he can hope to achieve in 1985. Nevertheless, he may believe that advancing such a broad agenda will give him some latitude for striking acceptable political bargains with the senior military. As China approaches what promises to be a climactic party Conference of Delegates in September 1985, army-party tensions may heighten but in our view will remain manageable.

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A Crucial Session: The High Command Meets

Deng appears to have used a recent convocation of the party Military Commission to announce a series of major military reforms and personnel measures. According to official media reports, the Commission held a

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"discussion meeting" from 25 October to 2 November to deal with structural reform in the Army, party rectification, and military participation in the economic reforms approved at the October party plenum. Deng and other top officers addressed what appears to have been a large assemblage representing every important national and regional command.

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The most sensitive issue,

[redacted] was Deng's "retirement" from the chairmanship of the Military Commission and General Secretary Hu Yaobang's accession to the post.

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Other proposed measures

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- Reorganization of China's 11 military regions, reducing the number to six and sharply contracting the number of staff slots.

- A substantial reduction of overall military personnel strength, to be achieved mainly through accelerated retirement of older officers, lower recruitment, and paring away of many noncombatant activities and facilities.

- Appointment of Zheng Weishan, current commander of the Lanzhou Military Region to succeed Yang Dezhi as Chief of the General Staff. Zheng had not previously been mentioned among the candidates for Yang's position.

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In published remarks, Deng singled out units above the corps level--namely, military regions and central command staffs--as needing greater retirement efforts. To all the old-timers who have thus far refused to make way for younger replacements, Deng issued a barbed request that "some enlightened personages" set a good example by stepping aside, leaving implicit a threat to make outright dismissals if the numbers of volunteers are insufficiently high. As 1985 ended, 40 officers of the General Staff entered into highly publicized "voluntary" retirement amid high level promises of more to come.

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The official media has also widely publicized Deng's injunction that the armed forces participate fully in the nation's top priority, economic development. In recent remarks, Chief of Staff Yang Dezhi echoed Deng's call and noted that implementation will entail not only shifting military industrial capacity and military facilities--such as airfields and ports--to civilian use, but considerable budget slashing and force reduction as well.

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Warning Signals

Heretofore, the military has been slow to implement this type of sweeping change. We have no direct evidence of individual soldier-politicians who claim to represent a substantial military constituency coming forward with lists of grievances or alternative agendas.

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[redacted] we discern veiled criticisms of Deng's

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proposals in the public media and responses to criticism in statements by Deng, Hu, and other top leaders. The ambiguity of the current exchange is typical of sensitive debates within the leadership.

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Our reading between the lines of recent press articles suggests that some senior soldiers are: miffed at being called to account for their Cultural Revolution-era behavior; fearful that they will lose their perquisites if retired; and wary of Hu Yaobang, whom some believe unfit to succeed Deng as military overseer. The articles suggest that political problems exist in the sensitive Beijing Military Region, ever a key security concern for the party leadership, and one recent newspaper article implied that military men should be free to handle military affairs without civilian interference.

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Recent comments of Hu Yaobang, in an interview with the editor of a major Hong Kong daily, reinforce the impression of tension between the party and some senior military. Hu went on at considerable length to emphasize the Army's tradition of complete loyalty to the party. He even recalled a personal example from the late 1930s, when he was director of the Red Army's Organization Department and had the authority, at age 23, to issue orders to the Army's most illustrious commanders. "They still had to carry out what I told them...The Army must obey the party organization."

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Veterans' Views

In our view, the concerns being signaled in the media are longstanding and, for the most part, reflect the parochial anxieties of elderly veterans who worry about their personal livelihoods and perquisites. We believe the group most troublesome to Deng is the Army's "revolutionary elders," seasoned, loyal commanders and commissars who go back to the earliest days of the Red Army. Now mostly over 65, these generals cling to command positions or to advisory posts within the military regions and central military apparatus. They appear to believe that the party still owes them for their past achievements.

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Personnel issues appear paramount to the old guard. The veteran soldiers facing forced retirement see uncertain futures. Those who will remain in uniform must measure up against new criteria that generally stress education over experience. Moreover, their behavior during the Cultural Revolution, when most believed they were simply following orders, has reemerged as an important issue in the current rectification campaign, and many are being forced to conduct painful self-criticisms. Some are troubled by the prospect of a new military commission chairman, Hu, who may not be as sympathetic to their concerns and traditions as Deng has been.

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These important practical concerns, however, preoccupy a decreasing, although still politically significant, number of veteran soldiers. Natural attrition is gradually shrinking these ranks. Many--although not as many as Deng would like--have already cooperated and voluntarily withdrawn from important assignments.

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In addition, some old timers have questioned the ideological foundations of Deng's program, holding that current policies depart too widely from the orthodox Communism for which they fought their revolution. Such objections, whether raised out of true commitment or mere political expedience, have

forced Deng's propaganda corps to create convoluted arguments to justify their programs. We believe that, over time, this concern also will diminish in importance. [redacted]

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In our view, there is a broad band of middle level officers who stand to gain by Deng's emphasis on professionalism and expertise, priorities that Hu will preserve. This generation of officers, which will fill the positions vacated after years of blockage by the Long March generation, in our judgment represents an important and growing constituency within the Army for the current programs and priorities. [redacted]

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The Party's Perspective

Deng's pointed remarks at the Military Commission forum typify the growing complaints of a now impatient party leadership. [redacted]

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[redacted] In part, however, the problem is of Deng's own making. He himself arranged for the rehabilitation and appointment of many old generals who, having lost ten years on the promotion ladder during the Cultural Revolution, now demand ranks and perquisites as their just due. Although these veterans formed an important component of Deng's political base, he now wants them to retire to make way for a rejuvenated officer corps. Their reluctance to step aside has complicated the entire reform package and fuels popular uncertainties about the stability of the political succession. [redacted]

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In our view, Deng has maintained his chairmanship of the Military Commission because he has the standing and influence among the commanders to serve as the indispensable goad--a critical yet reliable advocate of the military point of view--pushing for reform of an aged and outdated military establishment. Since taking the post of Military Commission Chairman in late 1980, Deng has generally been able to win the cooperation of reluctant senior soldier-politicians. He apparently recognizes, however, that he must step down from his military posts while he is still in good health. In both a symbolic and a practical sense, command of the military must be resolved. [redacted]

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Although the evidence is contradictory, we believe that Deng now intends that Hu should take over the Commission chairmanship this year. It is a decision that could presumably be ratified at the special party Conference of Delegates scheduled for September. That meeting is shaping up as a climactic one, toward which many of Deng's other reform efforts, including a rejuvenation of the party Central Committee, are aimed. By moving so rapidly on so many fronts, Deng risks creating a unified opposition but gives himself bargaining space to maximize his gains. [redacted]

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With respect to military issues, Deng appears to have already done some bargaining. While pushing hard on military/economic and personnel issues, Deng has tried to meet some of the other concerns of the old veterans. The party rectification campaign has been softened, threatening far fewer people with dismissal or disciplinary action. According to Hu, many of the career soldiers guilty of serious misconduct during the Cultural Revolution are not being prosecuted but are simply being discharged at full salary. [redacted]

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Despite widespread recognition of political shortcomings, the military since August has been praised as an exemplar of rectification. Recent articles have praised the armed forces' smooth handling of longstanding problems, even while implying that they should have been resolved years ago. In reality, we have seen very little hard evidence that the original aims of rectification have been achieved within the Army, but Beijing nevertheless has declared a first phase victory and is moving on to phase two.

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Outlook

Although not all China's superannuated or incompetent officers will step aside, we believe that many will yield before the combination of attractive retirement benefits, lenient rectification treatment, and political prodding. Moreover, we judge that Deng will be satisfied if he can accomplish a shake-up in the corps-to-military region layer of command and if Hu can take over the Commission chairmanship without too great a commotion. In our view, however, Deng cannot expect to accomplish all that he has undertaken in the military, and his successors will necessarily have to tie up many loose ends. The restructuring efforts appear intended to remove obstacles to Hu's accession, and the degree of success in one may portend smoothness of transition in the other. Then, it will probably be up to Hu to strike his own political bargains with those senior soldier-politicians under his command.

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EA M 84-10006

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